

VZCZCXRO4896  
RR RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHHI #0571/01 1360848  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 150848Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7833  
INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH 4726  
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000571

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)  
SUBJECT: ZEN MASTER MEETS WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: 07 Ho Chi Minh 0261

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**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: In a May 12 meeting with the Ambassador, the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh noted improvements in religious freedom in Vietnam but said corruption and bureaucracy had hampered their visit. Hanh and a delegation of the order of Lang Mai from France are visiting Vietnam to attend the United Nations Day of Vesak meetings in Hanoi May 14-17, 2008, and to hold religious retreats and meet with followers throughout the country. His visits generate huge excitement amongst Buddhist followers in Vietnam, as he is seen as one of the world's leading Buddhist thinkers. This time is no exception. End Summary.

Background: Long History of Promoting Peace

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**¶2.** (SBU) Holding the title "Zen Master," Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh is considered one of the most prominent figures in the international Buddhist community after the Dalai Lama. A former member of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Thich Nhat Hanh went to the United States to study religion in 1961 and to teach at Princeton and Columbia Universities. He returned to Vietnam in 1964 and founded the Buddhist College in Saigon, which later became Van Hanh University. In 1966, he again traveled to the United States, calling for U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. As a result of his vocal opposition to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the then Government of South Vietnam refused him re-entry, effectively exiling him from the country. He ended up settling in France, and has built a global following.

**¶3.** (SBU) The current Government of Vietnam (GVN) permitted Venerable Hanh to return to Vietnam in 2005, and again in 2007. The UBCV has been reluctant to support Hanh, fearing his trips to Vietnam would be used as propaganda by the GVN. During his first visit to Vietnam in 2005, Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and Venerable Thich Quang Do of the UBCV refused to meet with him and the UBCV has repeatedly called on Hanh to make public statements against the Vietnamese government's record on religious freedom. During his first and subsequent visits, Hanh has enjoyed increasing popularity amongst Buddhist followers in Vietnam and his lecturers are very well attended, particularly by young people. On this visit, he again led a popular retreat, and plans a second following the UN Vesak celebrations.

Zen Master Returns to Vietnam with Conditions

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**¶4.** (SBU) During his meeting with the Ambassador, Venerable Hanh detailed his history of travels to the U.S. to protest the Vietnam War, as well as his leadership of the Buddhist delegation to the Paris Peace talks and eventual establishing of an order in southern France. Though he has been critical of Vietnam's communist government, Venerable Hanh's sometimes rocky relationship with the GVN seems to have improved somewhat in recent years. Hanh stated

that despite the GVN's unhappiness with his past criticisms, he was granted permission to teach, to have select titles of his books published in Vietnamese, and to have monastic and lay members of his Order accompany him around the country. Hanh noted that he tries to be a voice of reconciliation in the community, supporting new monks in his order, conducting prayer ceremonies to help heal remaining wounds on all sides from the Vietnam War and leading retreats for monks and lay people.

¶ 15. (SBU) Venerable Hanh stated that he agreed to attend the UN Vesak Day celebrations of the Buddha's birthday on the condition that his order be permitted to hold several retreats while in Vietnam. He emphasized that he does not attend many international conferences, preferring the practice of Buddhism through study and retreats to the papers and speeches prevalent at conferences and seminars. He went on to explain that he espouses an updated version of the Buddhist faith called "Engaged Buddhism" that practices mindfulness adapted to Western sensibilities.

#### Conditions Improving, Corruption a Challenge for Religion

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¶ 16. (SBU) Citing Vietnam's systemic corruption as the major challenge facing religious freedom in Vietnam, he and his followers shared details of a number of bureaucratic challenges thrown up by the GVN in connection with their visit: long delays for visas, police pressure on the hotel management to cancel the group's contract, cancellation of conference rooms, delays in getting the correct permits for the retreats, and attempts to charge unreasonable fees for services not provided or received. However, after Venerable Hanh contacted "a friend" in the Office of the Prime Minister, most of the issues were resolved and the group was able to hold one retreat in Hanoi and plans to hold a second retreat in Hoi An following the UN Vesak celebrations. Venerable Hanh noted that the GVN required both retreats and all other religious activities of the

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group be conducted at Buddhist temples or pagodas, based on the fact that the group's visit was sponsored by the GVN-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

¶ 17. (SBU) Venerable Hanh expressed his view that although difficulties remain, conditions for religious groups in Vietnam are clearly improving. Hanh also suggested that one of his future trips to Vietnam might be sponsored by the U.S. Embassy or the Embassy of France, in the hopes that he and his followers could conduct seminars, workshops and retreats outside of the Buddhist temples and pagodas.

MICHALAK